Tell me is it cliché?

—"I built myself a house of glass

not to see out, but to see through

the version of myself I left behind."

William learned to disappear before he learned to see.

This was the order of operations in a house that was never empty but always felt lonely—a house five hours from the city, in a town small enough that everyone knew everyone's business and large enough that no one did anything about it. The kind of town where the temple bells marked the hours and the neighbors marked the deviations, where the air smelled of wet earth and jasmine and the particular, humid heaviness of a place that had been the same for so long that sameness had become a moral value.

William was the only child of his parents' current marriage.

The word current was important. It implied previous. It implied that the marriage was one in a sequence, a chapter in a longer book, and that William himself was a character who had appeared in the middle of the story rather than at its beginning. He was the only common link between his parents—the only person who belonged entirely to both of them, the only proof that this particular configuration of family was real and not just an arrangement. He was the bridge. And bridges, he would learn, bore the weight of the things they connected without ever being asked whether the weight was bearable.

His half-siblings—four of them, two from his father's first marriage and two from his mother's—were much older. They had their own rooms in other houses, their own lives in other cities, their own biological parents who existed as competing gravitational centers, pulling them away from William's house even when they were physically inside it.

When they visited—for holidays, for birthdays, for the obligatory family gatherings that his mother orchestrated with the precision of a military campaign—the house filled with bodies and noise and the performative warmth of people who were trying very hard to be a family. But William, even as a child, could see the effort. He could see the way his oldest half-brother checked his phone under the table, texting his "real" family. He could see the way his half-sister from his mother's first marriage looked at his father with the polite, guarded expression of someone who had decided long ago that this man was not her father and never would be.

He could see the fault lines running through the foundation of his family like cracks in old concrete—invisible from a distance, but unmistakable up close. The empty place settings at holidays. The conversations that circled certain topics the way

water circled a drain—approaching but never touching, always deflecting, the gravitational pull of the unsaid bending every sentence into a careful, diplomatic arc.

He learned to be useful. He learned to be quiet. He learned to take up as little space as possible while still occupying the space that was required of him—the space of the peacekeeper, the bridge, the only common child. He learned to read moods the way other children learned to read books—fluently, instinctively, the skill developing not from instruction but from necessity, from the survival imperative of a child who needed to know which parent was upset before the upset became visible, who needed to predict the weather of the household so he could dress accordingly.

He learned to feel like a guest in his own house.

He learned to disappear.

The camera came later.

His grandmother—his mother's mother, a woman who had lived through three husbands and who had opinions about everything and shared them freely, the kind of woman whose love was loud and specific and sometimes embarrassing and always, always real.

It was not new. It was a Leica M6, mechanical, the body heavy in his small hands, the metal cool, the leather grip worn smooth. The kind of camera that required intention. Every photograph demanded a decision. A commitment. The deliberate, conscious act of choosing what to see and how to see it and whether the seeing was worth preserving.

She had used it herself, before her eyes had clouded and her hands had shaken and the act of seeing had become too difficult to perform.

"You're always looking," she told him, pressing the camera into his hands with the ceremony of a priest passing a sacred object. Her voice was rough—aged, the voice of a woman who had smoked and laughed and argued for seventy years and whose vocal cords bore the evidence of every one. "Maybe this will help you keep what you see."

The sentence was simple. The sentence changed his life.

Because the camera did what his grandmother said it would do—it let him keep things. It let the boy who had learned to disappear become the boy who preserved. Every photograph was a small act of defiance against the impermanence that defined his childhood—the half-siblings who came and went, the place settings that were filled and emptied, the family that assembled and disassembled with the

regularity of tides.

The camera said: this happened. This was real. I was here, and I saw it, and now you can see it too.

In his hometown, William was the soft target.

He was the boy who didn't play sports. The boy who carried a camera. The boy who noticed things—the angle of light on a temple roof, the pattern of cracks in a wall, the way a dog's shadow stretched across the road at 4 PM—and who stood still while the other boys ran, who looked while the other boys competed, who observed while the other boys performed.

In a town where the boys played football on the field behind the temple and the girls watched from the sidelines and the social hierarchy was organized around athletic ability the way other hierarchies were organized around money or beauty, William's refusal—or inability, or disinterest, or whatever word you wanted to use for the simple fact that his body did not want to do the things the other bodies did—was a violation. A deviation. A crack in the surface of the town's expectations, and the town, like all small places, did not tolerate cracks.

The bullying was not always loud.

Sometimes it was the social death of being ignored—the way conversations stopped when he approached, the way seats were suddenly taken when he tried to sit down, the way invitations circulated through the class and somehow never reached him, the social architecture of exclusion built with the precision of an engineer and the cruelty of a child who had learned that the most effective violence was the kind that left no marks.

Sometimes it was the stolen notebooks, found later in the garbage, the pages torn out and scattered—the photographs he had glued inside them, small prints from the Leica, destroyed with the casual, thoughtless brutality of people who did not understand that what they were destroying was not paper but evidence. Evidence that William existed. Evidence that he had seen things. Evidence that the seeing mattered.

Sometimes it was the whispers in the hallways—audible enough to be heard, quiet enough to be denied. The whispers that traveled through the school's social architecture the way smoke traveled through air, contaminating every room.

But in adolescence, it got worse. Everything got worse. Adolescence was the accelerant—the hormones, the social restructuring, the desperate, frantic scramble for identity and status that puberty triggered, turning every classroom into a laboratory of cruelty and every hallway into a gauntlet.

Everything about him was attacked. His quietness. His camera. His clothes—the

slightly different clothes, the ones that didn't quite match the uniform of the other boys, the subtle, instinctive deviations from the norm that William couldn't help because his eye was trained to see beauty in difference and his body expressed that training without his permission.

The acne came at fourteen, the way it came for everyone, the hormonal inevitability of puberty written across his face in red and white. But for William—for William, who was already the target, who was already the one they had chosen to carry the weight of their cruelty—the acne became the final proof. The visible, undeniable evidence that he was, as they had always suspected, disgusting.

Have you seen his face?

I can't even look at him.

Someone should tell him to stay home until it clears up.

He started to believe them.

He started to look in the mirror and see what they saw—not the brown eyes, not the clean bone structure that would later make him beautiful, not the quiet, attentive face that would one day make strangers want to know him. He saw the acne. He saw the flaw. He saw the proof.

He stopped looking in mirrors.

He stopped looking at people.

He looked through the camera instead, because the camera let him see without being seen, let him observe without being observed, let him exist in the world without the world seeing his face and recoiling.

His mother found out.

Not because he told her. Because she saw. Because his mother was a woman who had tended a garden with quiet, relentless attention for decades and who understood that living things communicated their distress not through words but through changes in posture, in color, in the direction they turned toward or away from the light. She saw her son turning away from the light.

"William."

She was standing in his doorway. Evening. The house quiet—his father at work, the half-siblings absent, the only sound the ceiling fan turning slowly and the distant, rhythmic chirp of insects in the garden.

Her voice was gentle. Too gentle. The gentleness of a person who already knew the

answer and was asking the question not for information but for permission—permission to enter the room that her son had closed, permission to see the wound that her son was hiding.

"Tell me."

Two words. Spoken the way his grandmother spoke—directly, without cushion, with the understanding that some sentences needed to be short because the space after them needed to be long.

He told her.

Not everything—not the worst parts, not the details that would break her. Not the day they had taken his camera and passed it around the circle and he had stood in the center and watched them handle it—his grandmother's camera, the sacred object, the tool of his seeing—with the careless, mocking curiosity of people who did not understand what they were holding. Not the day they had written on his desk in permanent marker—the word, the one word, the word that was worse than all the other words because it was the word that meant you are nothing and we want you to know it.

He told her enough. He told her about the ignoring and the whispering and the way the classroom felt like a room with no doors. He told her about the acne and the way it made him feel visible in the worst way—exposed, marked, the flaw written on his face for everyone to read.

When he was done, she was quiet for a long time.

The ceiling fan turned. The insects chirped. The garden existed outside the window, tended and alive, the only thing in the house that his mother could control completely.

"This town," she finally said, "will never let you grow."

The sentence was not angry. It was sad—the specific, resigned sadness of a woman who loved the place she lived in and understood its cruelty simultaneously, who had planted her garden here and raised her son here and watched the town do to her son what small places do to different things: try to make them the same, and when they can't, try to make them gone.

"I'm going to send you to the city."

"I don't—I can't—"

"You can." She reached across the table and took his hands. Her fingers were warm—the warmth of garden soil, the warmth of sun-heated skin, the warmth that only a mother's hands contained, the specific thermal signature of a person who had held you before you were formed and would hold you after you were broken. "You can,

William. And you will. Because if you stay here, they will break something in you that I won't be able to fix."

Her eyes were wet. She didn't wipe them.

She made the hardest choice a mother could make. She sent him away. Not because she wanted to. Not because the distance—five hours by bus, five hours of road and landscape and the accumulating miles between a mother and her only common child—was anything other than a wound. But because the wound of distance was survivable, and the wound of staying was not.

"Take pictures of everything," she said. Her voice cracked. The crack was the only time he ever heard his mother's voice break. "So I can see what you see."

He packed the Leica. He packed his clothes. He packed the fabric swatches he had started collecting—small pieces of linen, silk, rough paper—that he touched when he was nervous because the textures grounded him, because the feeling of material between his fingers was the only thing that could anchor him when the world felt like it was dissolving.

He left on a Tuesday. His mother stood in the garden and watched the car pull away. He photographed her through the rear window—small, still, surrounded by the things she had planted, the things that grew because she tended them.

It was the best photograph he ever took. He never showed it to anyone.

The city was large and bright and indifferent.

He finished school in the city, living in rooms shared with relatives who were kind but busy, who fed him and housed him and occasionally asked about his grades but who were not his parents and did not know how to be his parents and were, in their own way, as overwhelmed by his presence as he was by theirs. He went to school, and he took photos, and he went home. The cycle was clean. The cycle was safe. The cycle did not require vulnerability.

He was terrified that if he let someone in, they would find the flaw. The flaw that the town had identified and the acne had confirmed and the mirror had shown him—the fundamental, irreparable wrongness of being William, of being quiet and observant and different and soft and all the things that the world did not want a boy to be.

He cut his hair. Clean. Short. The kind of hair that did not attract attention, that did not invite comment, that said I am here and I am normal and please do not look too closely.

He spent most of his money from his part-time jobs on skincare. Cleansers and toners and serums and masks and the thousand small bottles that promised to fix

what puberty had broken. The skincare was not vanity. The skincare was armor. The skincare was the daily, disciplined, ritualistic labor of a person who was trying to erase the evidence that the town had used to condemn him, who was scrubbing and toning and moisturizing his way toward a face that could not be attacked.

He hid behind simple clothes. Cream. Beige. Gray. Earth tones. He followed fashion just enough to be invisible—just enough to blend in, just enough to avoid the different that had marked him before. The clothes were camouflage.

He spoke when asked. He helped when people expected it. He smiled when smiles were required and nodded when nods were required and performed, with exhausting, relentless consistency, the role of a person who was fine. He was fine. He was always fine. The fineness was his masterpiece—the perfect, seamless, utterly convincing performance of a person who had no wounds, no scars, no flaw, no acne, no stolen notebooks, no word written on his desk.

He got into a good university. A full scholarship—the reward for years of grades that were excellent because grades were the one thing in his life that responded predictably to effort. Effort in, results out. The equation was clean. The equation was reliable. The equation did not whisper in hallways or steal cameras or write words on desks.

He moved into the dormitories—a small room, shared with a roommate who was polite and distant and treated the room as a place to sleep rather than a place to live, which suited William perfectly, because William treated every place as a place to pass through rather than a place to stay. The room was temporary. Everything was temporary. People were temporary. Only the photographs were permanent.

He was building a life that looked complete from the outside—the scholarship, the good grades, the camera always in his hands—but felt hollow from the inside, a structure without foundation, a house with no one living in it.

And then, in his second year, his camera broke.

The mechanical shutter on his vintage Leica jammed three days before a final project submission. The advance lever stuck mid-stroke, the mechanism frozen, the camera suddenly and completely silent—the silence not the comfortable silence of a tool at rest but the terrible silence of a tool that had stopped working, the silence of a heart that had stopped beating.

William sat in the university darkroom—the red light overhead, the chemical smell of developer and fixer, the space that had become his sanctuary. He sat with the camera in his hands, turning it over, trying the lever again and again, the click that should have been there absent, the absence enormous.

His grandmother's camera. The sacred object. The thing she had pressed into his hands and said maybe this will help you keep what you see.

Broken.

"You look like someone just shot your dog."

The voice came from behind him—low. The voice carried the way a good baritone carried—effortlessly, without strain, filling the room without crowding it.

William turned.

The speaker was older—third or fourth year, probably, with the confident, slightly rumpled appearance of a senior who had stopped trying to impress anyone and had arrived at the specific, comfortable aesthetic of a person who dressed for himself. Tanned skin—the outdoor tan, the rooftop tan. Brown hair, slightly messy, the mess genuine. Glasses pushed up on his forehead—reading glasses, the kind that a person who only needed them for close work kept permanently available, the accessibility a habit rather than a statement. A camera bag over his shoulder, the strap worn from use, the leather darkened where his hand habitually gripped it.

He was wearing a t-shirt with a band logo William didn't recognize and jeans that had clearly been owned for a long time.

"My shutter jammed." William said. His voice was flat—the flatness of a person who was trying very hard not to cry over a camera because crying over a camera was not something that normal people did, and William was performing normalcy with every remaining ounce of his energy.

The stranger looked at him. The look was brief but thorough—the look of a photographer, a person who assessed visual information the way a doctor assessed symptoms, quickly, precisely, without wasting time on the irrelevant.

"Let me see."

The stranger didn't ask permission. He crossed to William's workstation in two long strides, pulled up a stool, and held out his hand. The hand was open, patient—the hand of a person who believed that broken things deserved to be fixed rather than replaced, who hated waste, who saw a jammed shutter not as a failure but as a problem that had a solution.

William, too shocked to protest, passed him the Leica.

The stranger turned it over. His hands were careful—respectful, the way you handled something that belonged to someone else and that you understood was important even without being told. He examined the advance lever. He pressed the shutter release. Nothing. He tilted the camera, looked at the mechanism from underneath, made a small sound—not frustration but recognition, the ah of a person

who had identified the issue.

He produced, from somewhere, a small toolkit—the kind that camera people carried, the miniature screwdrivers and lens cloths and the specific, esoteric instruments of a craft that required both precision and patience.

For five minutes, he worked in silence. William watched, his hands clasped in his lap, his heart somewhere in his throat—not in his chest where it belonged, but higher, displaced by the anxiety of watching a stranger handle the most important object in his life.

Finally, the stranger held up the camera. He pressed the shutter.

Click.

The click—the mechanical, beautiful, unmistakable click of a working camera—filled the room. The sound was small, but to William, it was enormous. It was the sound of breathing. It was the sound of the heart resuming.

"There." He handed it back. The handshake of the transfer was careful—the camera passed from one set of competent hands to another, the object treated with the reverence it deserved. "Your advance lever was slightly misaligned. Probably caught something when you were rewinding. It happens with the older M6s. The tolerances are tight."

William took the camera. Held it. Felt the weight—the familiar, reassuring, anchoring weight of the object that had been his since he was twelve, the object that his grandmother had given him with the ceremony of a person passing on a purpose.

"Thank you," William said. The words felt inadequate. "I—thank you. I was going to miss my final project deadline, and I couldn't find anyone who could fix it, and—"

"I'm Tui."

The name was offered easily, without ceremony—the way Tui offered everything, William would learn. Without fuss. Without expectation of reciprocity. The way you offered water to someone who was thirsty.

"William."

Tui nodded. The nod was warm—the warmth of a person who collected people the way some people collected cameras, not for possession but for appreciation.

"There's a showcase next week," Tui said. "Senior exhibition. I have a corner. You should come."

The invitation was casual. Tui said it the way he said everything—without pressure, without the weight of expectation, the invitation offered the way you offered a hand

to someone who was standing near a ledge: take it if you want it, and if you don't, I'll still be here.

"Okay," William heard himself say. "I'll come."

The words surprised him. Not because they were unusual—He didn't say them out of obligation or politeness or the reflexive compliance that years of performing normalcy had trained into him. He said them because something in Tui's voice—the warmth, the ease, the absence of judgment—had reached through the wall of William's careful invisibility and found the person behind it.

"Good," Tui said. And smiled. The smile was simple—not performative, not strategic, just warm. The smile of a person who was genuinely pleased.

William didn't know it then, but the jammed shutter was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

And thanks to that small exhibition at the university, William met Lego.

The gallery was a minimalist white box—It was filled with the soft murmur of intellectuals—art students, professors, the occasional outsider who had wandered in from the street, all of them performing the specific, choreographed ritual of gallery attendance: stop, look, nod, move on.

William was practically glued to the wall in the furthest corner, clutching his Leica to his chest like a shield.

He had come to support Tui. This was what he told himself—I am here to support Tui—but the truth was more complicated. The truth was that Tui had asked, and William had said yes, and now he was here, and being here was terrifying, and the Leica against his chest was the only thing keeping his heartbeat at a socially acceptable rate.

The crowd moved past him, ignored him, the invisibility he had practiced for years serving him well. Nobody looked at the quiet boy in the earth-toned clothes with the vintage camera. Nobody needed to. He was part of the wall. He was furniture. He was almost beginning to relax—the shoulders dropping a millimeter, the grip on the Leica loosening—when he sensed someone enter his personal bubble.

The bubble was sacred. The bubble was the invisible perimeter that William maintained around his body at all times—the distance that said this far and no further, the boundary between himself and the world that he enforced not with words but with posture, with the slight angling of his body away from approaching people, the subtle signals that said I am here but I am not available.

Someone had entered the bubble. Someone had entered it without hesitation,

without the social negotiation of approaching, without the gradual, polite encroachment that most people performed when they moved toward a stranger. This person had simply—arrived.

William looked.

The person was his age, maybe younger. Shorter than William—significantly shorter, even with the platform boots that added three inches. Black hair, styled in long, layered bangs that almost reached the eyes, with side strands that framed the face and longer hair that fell below the shoulders. Light-colored contact lenses that caught the gallery lights and threw them back as small, silver-gold sparks—the lenses expensive, deliberate, transforming the eyes into something luminous and slightly otherworldly.

A circular septum piercing. Earrings—multiple, in both ears, the lobe and upper lobe and helix and industrial, a constellation of metal against skin, each piece chosen, each piece intentional, the arrangement not random but curated, the way a painter curated a palette.

And the clothes.

The person was wearing a black t-shirt with pink ribbons sewn onto the sides and back, the ribbons standing out against the black background like trails of light. The t-shirt was long, almost reaching the thighs, worn over shorts that were more for privacy than coverage. Leg warmers—the kind that belonged in a dance studio or a fever dream, textured, warm, impractical, beautiful. Platform boots—black, chunky, the kind that made a statement with every step, the kind that said I am here and you will know it. A heart-shaped bag with ribbons and lace, the kind of bag that looked like it had been ordered from a Japanese fashion magazine or assembled from a dream.

And rings. Silver. Multiple. Each finger a different design. And nails—long, dark, detailed, each one a canvas.

William's finger found the shutter button.

The ribbons. The rings. The way the platform boots planted themselves on the gallery floor with a quiet, certain weight—The contrast between the elaborate clothes and the nervous fidgeting—the hand touching a ribbon, adjusting a ring, the small, unconscious movements of a person who was new here and unsure and covering the unsurety with accessories.

The confident aesthetic and the uncertain body language. The armor and the vulnerability beneath it.

William raised his camera. Slowly. Not pointing it at the person yet, but holding it at chest level, the way he held it when he was preparing to capture something, the

way he held it when he had found something worth seeing—the way his grandmother had told him to hold it, with intention, with the understanding that every photograph was a commitment.

The person turned around.

They caught William staring through the lens. The light-colored contact lenses met his eyes—direct, unflinching, aware. Not angry. Not offended. Just—aware.

William froze. The old panic surged—caught, exposed, seen—the panic that arrived every time someone noticed him, every time the invisibility failed, every time the wall he had built between himself and the world was breached.

His hand moved to his face. The unconscious gesture—the fingers touching his jaw, checking the skin, the reflex from the acne days, the body's muscle memory of vulnerability. Is it smooth? Is it clear? Can they see the flaw?

"You have... interesting clothes." William said. His voice was rough—rough from disuse, rough from the panic, rough from the specific, sandpaper quality that his voice took on when he was speaking to someone new and was terrified and was trying very hard not to show it.

Something had shifted. The panic was receding. The words were coming easier—not because the fear was gone but because the person in front of him was looking at him with an expression that was not judgment, not assessment. The expression was—curious. Open. The expression of a person who had been caught being looked at and had decided to stay and find out why.

The person's face flushed. A soft pink.

"I make them," the person said. "The ruffles and things. Most people think it's too much."

"It's not too much." William said.

The sentence surprised him. It surprised him because it was not the polite, performative, socially acceptable response—not that's nice or cool or the vague. It was the truth. The clothes were not too much. The clothes were exactly enough. The clothes were a person telling the world who they were without using words, and the telling was brave, and the bravery was beautiful.

The person's eyes widened. The blush deepened. The brightening of the face was visible, physiological—the specific, involuntary brightening that happened when a person who was accustomed to hearing too much heard, instead, enough.

"I'm Lego," the person said. The name offered like the first note of a song—bright, specific, slightly unexpected. "I... I do gymnastics. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Aerial acrobatics. Silks and things. It's like gymnastics but—" A gesture. The hands moving in the air, describing a shape that was part circle and part spiral, the body's attempt to communicate a movement that language couldn't capture. "—in the air."

"William," William replied.

"William," Lego repeated. Testing the name.

"I see that you two met." Tui said, appearing from somewhere—materializing the way Tui materialized, without warning, without noise, the social architecture of the room bending to accommodate his presence the way a river bent around a rock.

"Careful, William," Tui said, a rare grin tugging at his mouth. "Once he starts talking, he doesn't have a 'stop' button."

"He?" William said. The word was quiet—a question, not a challenge. He looked at Lego, who was still smiling, who didn't seem bothered by the pronoun. Lego's face was open—the openness of a person who had been asked this question before and who answered it not with defensiveness but with the patient, practiced ease of someone who had long ago decided that their identity was not a secret to be guarded but a fact to be shared.

"He," Lego confirmed. Simply. The way you confirmed the weather or the time.

Lego became someone he could talk to freely.

The transition from stranger to friend happened not gradually but suddenly—the way a door opened, the way a light came on, the way a camera shutter clicked. One moment William was clutching his Leica in a gallery corner, and the next moment Lego was texting him at midnight with photos of nail designs and asking which one he should wear tomorrow and signing the texts with stickers of a bear that William learned was Gloomy Bear and that Lego loved with the specific, total, uncomplicated devotion that Lego brought to all his loves.

Lego was the person he talked to about his sexuality for the first time. Not in a dramatic, revelatory, coming-out conversation—not the cinematic moment, not the tears and the music and the slow-motion embrace. In a casual, late-night video call. Lego doing his skincare. William doing his skincare. The two of them performing the ritual simultaneously, the video call propped up on their bathroom mirrors, the cotton pads and the serums and the masks creating a shared, domestic, strangely intimate space.

"Can I ask you something?" William had said.

"Always, Liam."

"How did you know? That you—that you were—"

"Queer?"

"Yeah."

Lego had paused. Mid-serum. The dropper hovering over his cheek, the liquid catching the bathroom light. "I didn't know," Lego said. "I just—stopped pretending I didn't. Does that make sense?"

It made sense. It made the most sense anything had ever made.

"I think I might be—"

"You don't have to finish the sentence," Lego said. His voice was gentle—careful gentleness of a person who understood that some sentences were harder to finish than others and who was willing to wait, and wait, and wait, for as long as the finishing required. "You can say it when you're ready. Or you can never say it. Either way, I'm here."

William had cried. Silently. The tears falling onto the cotton pad in his hand, the pad absorbing them, the tears and the toner mixing.

Lego didn't say anything. He just kept doing his skincare. And his presence was enough.

Lego was the person who showed up at William's dorm room with snacks and insisted on watching movies together, curled up on William's narrow bed, providing running commentary that was half critique and half stream-of-consciousness poetry. Lego was the person who wore different clothes every day and who noticed when William liked a particular outfit and wore it again, just for him, just because.

Lego was the first person in William's life who touched him without asking for anything in return. Who leaned against his shoulder while watching movies. Who reached for his hand during scary scenes. Who hugged him—actually hugged him, the full-body, no-holds-barred, physically fluent hug of a person who communicated through contact—and who, in doing so, taught William that touch was not always a threat. That being close to someone was not always a precursor to being hurt.

Thanks to Tui, his world expanded.

He met Nut—who was older, broader, steadier, more like an older brother than a friend. Nut who lifted people up, literally, who carried the weight of every room he entered without showing the strain, who looked at William's tattoo designs one

afternoon and said "I could do that on your back" with the quiet certainty of a person who saw the body as canvas and who understood that the art William wanted—the unfinished, bold, different art that William was too afraid to show the world—deserved to exist on skin rather than just on paper.

He met Hong—who was sarcastic but made him laugh, who said the things everyone was thinking and said them without flinching. Hong who helped him find part-time jobs—because Hong knew the agencies and the casting directors and the specific, mercenary machinery of an industry that William wanted nothing to do with but that paid well enough to fund his education and his skincare and his film.

He learned to let people in. Slowly. Each opening a risk, each risk rewarded with something he hadn't expected: warmth.

He was there for them at the party that night too.

The night of the party—the warehouse, the blue wristband, the fire pit and the metal chairs—William was not expecting to meet anyone new. He was expecting what he always expected: to be present, to be useful, to hold his camera and observe from the edges and disappear when the disappearing felt necessary.

And then Hong had arrived with a stranger.

Est.

Est who was tall and fair-skinned and jaw-lined and dark-eyed and wearing a turtleneck that looked like armor and smelling like something expensive and cold—vetiver, iris, wet asphalt—the scent of a person who had curated their olfactory presence with the same clinical precision that William applied to his skincare.

Est was easy to talk to. Easier than William had expected—easier than someone who looked like that should have been, someone whose face had sold campaigns and whose body had been photographed by professionals and whose presence, in person, carried the specific, heavy, gravitational quality of a person who had been looked at so much that looking itself had become a medium he existed in.

But when Est smiled at him—not the model's smile, not the camera smile, but the real smile, the one that happened while they were drinking and talking about cyanotypes and the chemical compound that made rain smell like rain—William felt something happen inside his chest.

The something was not new. The something was familiar—the same something that had happened at twelve when his grandmother put the Leica in his hands, the same something that happened every time he found something worth seeing and raised

the camera and committed to the act of looking. The recognition. The click. The yes, this, here, now.

He found himself falling for someone for the first time.

Not the abstract, distant, safely theoretical falling that he had experienced before—the crushes on classmates who didn't know he existed, the quiet, internal, never-spoken admiration that was safe because it was one-directional and therefore could never be rejected. This was different. This was mutual. This was happening in real time, in the firelight, in the space between two metal chairs, in the language of shared sentences and brown eyes meeting dark eyes and not looking away.

He kept drinking. And something changed—he could feel it in the air, the way you could feel the barometric pressure drop before a storm, the atmosphere between them shifting from talking to something else, the something else unnamed but physical, present, alive.

They kissed.

And they ended up at Est's apartment.

He didn't remember how it started—the sequence was fractured, the chronology dissolved by alcohol and adrenaline and the specific, time-bending quality of desire. But he remembered the taste of alcohol, salt, and olives on Est's mouth. He remembered kissing back, and the kissing back was the bravest thing he had done—braver than leaving his hometown, braver than standing in the gallery with his camera, braver than any photograph he had ever taken, because this was not capturing. This was being captured.

"Is everything alright?" he had asked. "Are you too drunk?"

Because William was careful. More careful than the situation required. Because the town had taught him what it felt like to have something taken without permission, and he would not—could not—would never—take without asking.

Est silenced him with kisses.

Est's skin was warm. Warmer than the air. The warmth of a body that was aroused, the blood flowing to the surface, the capillaries dilating, the skin flushing with the increased circulation that desire produced. The photographer in William cataloged the warmth—the way it felt under his hands, the way the skin responded to touch, the way Est's body arched when William found the spot beneath his jaw.

He had been so gentle. He had been gentle because gentleness was the only language he knew, because his hands were the hands of a person who handled cameras and cyanotype paper and fabric swatches with the understanding that precious things required careful hands, and Est—drunk, vulnerable, beautiful, lonely

—was the most precious thing he had ever held.

In the morning, with the alcohol gone, the bravery went with it.

The morning light came through Est's windows—the light of the high-end condo, the good light, the light that fell on marble surfaces and charcoal linens and a climate-controlled shelf of a hundred perfumes. The light was honest. The light showed everything.

William lay beside Est—Est who was asleep, Est who was beautiful even in sleep, especially in sleep, the jawline relaxed, the armor down, the person visible beneath the product. Est who worked with Hong. Est who was famous. Est who had been on campaigns and billboards and screens. Est who probably knew thousands of guys better than William—more confident, more beautiful, more worthy of the space beside him in those expensive sheets.

He became the coward he was always called.

He left.

Silently. Carefully. The way he had learned to disappear—the body moving without sound, the feet finding the quiet parts of the floor, the door opening and closing with the practiced, invisible efficiency of a person who had spent his entire life entering and exiting rooms without being noticed.

He left Est alone in bed.

He left behind his desire and his attraction and the night that had been the bravest thing he had ever done and the morning that was the most cowardly. And he felt the devastating, familiar weight of someone who had just been in a beautiful place, had willingly left it, and was now outside, gazing at the building that contained the interior, just as he had spent his entire life outside—watching through lenses, observing from edges, seeing without being seen.

When he surfaced, he was face down.

A week had passed. A week of studies and part-time shoots and the daily, disciplined performance of normalcy—the skincare routine, the earth-toned clothes, the camera in his hands, the face that said I am fine to everyone who didn't look closely enough to see that he was not.

Between studies, work, and going out, he was in Nut's studio.

Shirtless on the table. The hydraulic chair reclined, his chest against the padded surface, his face turned to the side, his arms hanging. He could hear Hong and Lego talking in the background—their voices overlapping the way they always

overlapped, Hong's flat monotone and Lego's musical brightness creating the specific, familiar, almost symphonic sound of a conversation between two people who had been having the same conversation for years and who enjoyed the having as much as the content.

Nut was completely silent. Working on the unfinished tattoo on William's back.

They had barely made progress with the first lines—the design still emerging, still becoming, the tattoo in its earliest stages, the outline incomplete, the shading not yet begun. The tattoo was the thing that William wanted to be but was afraid to show—the bold, different, too much thing that he hid beneath his earth-toned clothes the way he hid everything, behind layers, behind camouflage, behind the careful, consistent performance of normal.

Usually, he would be suffering. The needle was sharp, the sensation a specific, rhythmic, burning drag across the skin that was somewhere between pain and something else—something that was not quite pleasure but was not quite pain either, something that required endurance, something that tested you.

Today he had fallen asleep.

The exhaustion of the week—the sleepless nights, the face he couldn't forget, the face he couldn't remember, the morning he had run away from—had caught up with him, and the rhythmic drag of the needle had become, paradoxically, a lullaby, and he had dropped into sleep the way a stone dropped into water, completely, without resistance.

"My manager called me a liability," Hong said.

The voice reached William through the fog of half-sleep—arriving not as words but as sounds, the sounds assembling slowly into meaning, the meaning assembling slowly into a sentence that pulled him closer to the surface.

"Est's manager called my manager incompetent. There was yelling. There was also, somehow, a photoshoot agreement?"

He felt something move inside him when he heard the name.

Est.

The name was a key turning in a lock. The name opened the door he had been trying to keep closed all week—the door behind which he kept the warehouse and the fire and the metal chairs and the taste of olives and the skin that was warm and the morning he had run from.

Nut's gloved hand moved across his back—the green soap, the gentle wiping, the cleaning of the fresh lines. Usually the worst part—the skin raw, the soap stinging, the sensation a sharp, specific discomfort that made William's hands clench and his

breathing shorten. Today he barely felt it. The name was louder than the soap.

"So basically," Hong concluded, "I went from being fired to being in a campaign with the International Darling. In the space of forty-five minutes. While being yelled at. By a woman who hates me."

"Well, it's better than being fired," Nut said. His voice was warm, deep—the bass note beneath Hong's flat monotone, the steady, grounding frequency that kept the conversation from floating away.

When Nut finished, William got up. Slowly. Feeling his body go numb—the specific, tingling numbness of skin that had been worked on, the blood returning to the surface, the fresh ink settling into the dermal layer.

"You fell asleep, champ," Nut said. There was a gentleness in the word—champ—the gentleness of an older brother who had watched a younger one pass out on his table and who had kept working, carefully, precisely, because the work was sacred and the person was trusted.

"The lines look good," Nut added. "We'll let this heal before the next session. Two weeks."

William nodded. He sat up. His back burned—the good burn, the burn of something being created, the opposite of the burn of something being destroyed.

"Hungry?" Nut asked.

"Yep," Hong said. "Starving."

Nut stood up. He moved from the studio area to the kitchen with the practiced ease of a person whose apartment was both workplace and home, the boundaries between the two defined not by walls but by function. He served a plate—the spaghetti with vegetables and shrimp, the food already prepared, already warm, the evidence of someone having cooked earlier in the day.

"Lego made this," Nut said, placing the plates on the coffee table. "Before the session."

"I made it with love," Lego said, from the couch where he had been sitting the entire time, cross-legged, his phone in one hand, his other hand resting on Hong's arm. "And also with shrimp."

They ate together on the sofa, using the coffee table. William was shirtless—the fresh tattoo on his back exposed to the air, the ink still glistening under the transparent bandage that Nut had applied with the precise, medical care of a person whose father was a surgeon and whose hands had inherited the steadiness

even if they hadn't inherited the profession.

The afternoon light painted everything gold. The espresso machine hummed on the counter. The faint smell of green soap and incense lingered—Nut's signature, the olfactory environment of a space that was equal parts studio, gym, and sanctuary.

The food was good. Lego's food was always good—surprising, because Lego ate so little of it himself, but good, the cooking an act of love expressed through ingredients rather than consumption.

William ate. He tried to focus on the food. He tried to focus on the texture—the pasta, the shrimp, the vegetables—the way he focused on fabric swatches when he was nervous, grounding himself in the physical, in the tactile, in the things he could touch and taste and verify.

He just wanted to distract himself with something. Anything. To forget the name that seemed to keep repeating itself in his head like a song stuck on a loop.

Est. Est. Est.

"He said I was dragging Est into my 'shadows,'" Hong said.

Now he was on the sofa, a plate of spaghetti on his lap and Lego glued to his side—Lego's body pressed against Hong's the way it was always pressed against Hong's, the contact continuous, the touching a form of breathing, the physical proximity not an event but a state, the default setting of a relationship that had been built on closeness.

Lego's own plate was forgotten on the table—a few bites taken, the fork resting at an angle, the food abandoned in favor of the more important work of being near Hong and listening. His hand rested on Hong's arm, the long nails—today a deep burgundy—against the leather of Hong's jacket.

"As if my entire existence were some kind of contamination."

"That's bullshit," Lego said. Fiercely. The fierceness was sudden—a flare, the bright, hot, immediate anger of a person who loved deeply and who experienced attacks on the people he loved as attacks on himself. The musical voice was still musical, but the music had changed key—minor now, sharp.

"It's industry bullshit," Hong corrected. "There's a difference."

"There's no difference. Bullshit is bullshit. Whether it comes from the internet or from a manager in a glass office, it's the same thing. It's people who are afraid of things they don't understand trying to make the things go away."

Hong took a bite of spaghetti. "This is good, by the way," Hong said. "Did you make this?"

"Focus," Lego insisted. The hand on Hong's arm tightened—not painfully, but insistently. "What happened next?"

"So Est's part of all this now?" Nut asked.

The question was—careful.

"I guess so," Hong said, chewing. "I'm not sure. He said he wanted to protect me. From Kwan. From the fallout. He said—" Hong paused. "He said he got me into trouble."

"Did he?"

"No. I got me into trouble. I always get me into trouble. That's my entire brand."

"It's different than I thought," Lego added. He was still pressed against Hong's side, his phone in one hand—the phone always present, the screen always lit, the social media always running in the background of Lego's life like a soundtrack. "He's different on social media. On social media he's—you know. The Prince."

"And in person?"

"In person—" Hong searched. "In person he's a person."

"There were some pretty nasty rumors about him and his ex-boyfriend," Lego said.

William's fork stopped. Mid-twirl. The spaghetti wound around the tines, suspended.

"I tried not to read them, but—you know. Once you see the first one, you see them all." Lego's voice carried the specific, slightly guilty energy of a person who spent significant time on social media and who understood that the line between staying informed and consuming gossip was blurry and that he had crossed it.

"His ex?" Nut asked.

"He's also a model," Hong said. "I've seen the name around. Kai."

"They were together for three years," Lego said. "Then out of nowhere, they deleted everything. All the photos. The relationship status. Everything. Without saying anything. And then Est moved here, to Thailand. Like—poof." He made a gesture with his hands—a small explosion, the fingers spreading outward, the gesture miming disappearance. "People are saying he left his boyfriend for better pay here," Lego continued. "Or that he was cheating. Or that he's—I don't know. Cold. That he doesn't care about people. That he's a workaholic who chose his career over love."

William hadn't even thought about it over the weekend. Whether Est had a partner. Whether the body he had held was a body that belonged to someone else. Whether the mouth he had kissed was a mouth that someone else had kissed first and might still be kissing.

He'd just gone to bed with him.

Guilt haunted him like a shadow—This guilt was different. This guilt was the guilt of a person who might have been the other one—the third point of a triangle, the intruder, the person who had stepped into a story that was already being told and had disrupted the narrative.

"It's probably false," Lego said, before anyone else could speak. His voice carried the specific, gentle certainty of a person who believed in people. "People on social media are gossipy," Lego said. "They fill the silence with whatever they want. If someone doesn't tell their side, the internet makes one up. And the internet always makes up the worst version."

"Everyone has their secrets," Hong said. He picked up a shrimp. His voice was flat. "I'm not going to judge anyone for theirs."

William felt attacked.

He felt Hong's gaze on him. It seemed like a comment directed at him. A precision strike. The sarcasm not in the words but in the looking, the looking that said I know something and I'm choosing not to say it and the not-saying is its own kind of saying.

He ignored it. He sipped juice. The ice clinked in the glass—the sound sharp, crystalline, the sound of a person who was trying very hard to be casual and whose ice was betraying him.

"So what's the plan?" Nut asked. "With the photo. The campaign."

"Dana—that's Est's manager—she pitched a concept. Yin and yang. Prince and Rebel. The whole contrast thing. Using the viral photo as a springboard instead of trying to bury it."

"That's smart," Nut said.

"It's good marketing," Hong admitted. "I hate that it's good marketing, but it is."

The studio was quiet. The silks hung from the ceiling—the aerial silks that Nut had installed for Lego, the steel structures visible if you looked up, the evidence of care hidden in the architecture. The afternoon light moved across the floor, painting long rectangles of gold on the industrial concrete. The green soap and the incense mixed with the smell of Lego's cooking.

William ate. He chewed. He swallowed. He performed the mechanics of consumption while his mind was elsewhere—five days in the past, in an apartment that smelled of vetiver and iris, in a bed with charcoal sheets, beside a person

whose face was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and whose loneliness was the saddest thing he had ever felt.

He felt jealous of Est and Hong, who seemed quite close—the shared experience of being thrown together by a viral photo and emerging from the wreckage as collaborators. Hong had Est's number now. Hong would see Est again. Hong would stand beside Est in a photoshoot, and the cameras would capture them together, and the images would circulate, and the world would see the Prince and the Rebel and would not know that there was a third person in the story, a quiet person, an invisible person, a person who had been there first and who had left.

But he quickly stopped himself.

He had no right. They'd only met once. One night. One party. One sequence of drinks and conversations and a kiss that tasted like olives and a morning he had run from. He was probably just a one-night stand—the warm body that Est had needed to fill the space that his ex of three years had vacated, the temporary remedy, the human equivalent of a bandage applied to a wound that required surgery.

And William had only fallen for the model's perfect smile. The jawline. The campaign. The product, not the person.

Except that wasn't true. And William knew it wasn't true. And the knowing made the lie hurt more.

He had fallen for the person. For the Est who had listened to the answer—the recognition. For the Est who had taken a piece of ice from Lego's glass and chewed it and said actually really good ice with the surprised, genuine delight of a person who had been expecting nothing and had received something. For the Est who had smoked a cigarette on the patio and whose shoulders had dropped and whose face had changed and who had said that's the first time I've admitted that out loud with the raw, unfinished voice of a person who was discovering, in real time, that honesty was possible.

He had fallen for that person. Not the brand. Not the billboard. The person.

And then he had left.

When he looked up, Nut and Hong were still talking—their voices low, the conversation shifting to logistics, to schedules, to the upcoming campaign. The words were lost in the background.

His eyes met Lego's.

Lego's brown ones—no contacts today, no makeup, the face bare. The brown eyes looked at him the way Lego looked at everything—directly, intently, with the specific, piercing, almost supernatural attentiveness of a person who used physical

contact to read people and who could read, in the absence of contact, through looking alone.

William felt like he was being swallowed by those eyes. Like all his secrets were being unearthed—the morning he ran, the guilt, the jealousy, the longing, the face he couldn't stop seeing—as if Lego could hear his every thought, as if the distance between William's interior and Lego's perception was not a wall but a window, and the window was open, and the air was moving through it freely.

It was ridiculous. But that's how it felt.

Lego didn't say anything. He didn't need to. His hand moved—slowly, from Hong's arm to the space between his body and William's—and found William's wrist. The touch was light. The long burgundy nails rested against William's pulse point. The touch said nothing. The touch said everything.

I know. I see you, Whatever it is, I see it and I'm here.

William looked down at the burgundy nails on his wrist. He looked at the ice melting in his glass. He looked at the afternoon light on the floor, the silks on the ceiling, the plates of spaghetti on the coffee table, the evidence of a life that was shared and messy and real and his.

He didn't pull away.